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Trusting Experiments: Sociability and Transcendence in the Familiar Essay

Introduction

The fate of empiricism in the period between middle of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century (that is, between the sceptical naturalism of David Hume and the inductivism of John Stuart Mill) presents a curious episode that rarely attracts comment. Around a century ago, Leslie Stephen and Élie Halévy depicted this period as merely a lull or hiatus in British intellectual history, one in which the collective attention of philosophers was directed towards thinking through the consequences of the French Revolution. Halévy, for example, claimed that between David Hartley and James Mill, English thought passed ‘through a period of standstill’ (Halévy 434). Against this view, I will argue here that English—or, more accurately, British thought—did not so much stand still as switch paradigms, at least for a period. This change is evident in two developments: the socialisation of experience by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers and the impact of belletristic periodical culture upon philosophical discourse. These two factors were linked in ways that produced a remarkable turn in the relationship between philosophy and literature between the publication of Hume’s *Treatise* in 1740 and the heyday of the Romantic familiar essay in the 1820s. Consequently, at least part of what Halévy registered as an absence is, in effect, a swerve away from systematic epistemology and towards a form of essayism, involving a corresponding change in philosophical style and vocabulary.

In this essay, I explore these developments in more detail. I briefly outline the ways in which, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the idea of intersubjectivity emerged as a counterdiscourse to a scientific empiricism based upon the epistemological binary of subject and object and the correspondence theory of truth. Driven by a Scottish insistence that society precedes rationality, and exemplified by Hume’s idea of an ‘easy,’ conversational philosophy, empiricism was regrounded in social correspondence rather than epistemological correspondence; above all, it based itself in the circulation of trust and the kinds of performances that reinforced that trust. As economies of knowledge were increasingly linked to the maintenance of certain (trustworthy) forms of social behaviour, the epistemological stakes were raised for communicative acts in general, and for literary works in particular.

Since the days of *The Spectator*, the familiar essay had functioned as the literary genre of trusting intersubjectivity *par excellence*, a vehicle for philosophical experiments in communication.

And yet, Hume's treatment of trust was more radical than that of his Augustan precursors, raising the stakes for the essayistic performance. Only with Hume's conventionalist treatment of rationality did it become possible for empiricism to accommodate the idea that truth *presupposes* communication and that subjectivity itself is constructed relationally, via interactions with others. In the final section of the essay, I will suggest that, while Hume's language game of proto-pragmatic essayism is continued in the Romantic familiar essay, the *strategy* for promoting intersubjectivity changed in the early nineteenth century. Where the rewards of essaying for Hume lay in the consolidation of consensus through philosophically indifferent conversation, for a Romantic essayist such as Lamb, they consisted in the promotion of solidarity through the production of transcendence and re-enchantment.

Hume's 'easy' empiricism

The idea that Hume promoted a form of empiricism based upon trust and intersubjective consensus will inevitably strike many as counterintuitive. Some might even claim that Hume was the *least* trusting of all Enlightenment thinkers. It was Hume, after all, who wrote in the *Treatise of Human Nature* that '[n]o weakness of human nature is more universal and conspicuous than what we commonly call Credulity, or a too easy faith in the testimony of others [...]' (112)—a remark that foreshadowed his celebrated attack on testimonial evidence in the 'Essay on Miracles'. Certainly, the sceptical part of Hume's thought is not in dispute. By arguing that all our ideas are either '*copy'd from our impressions*' (72) or made up of simple ideas that are themselves derived from impressions, Hume picks at a loose thread in Locke's account of cognition. By the time he has finished pulling at this thread, he has completely unravelled the idea of causation, since 'from the mere repetition of any past impression, even to infinity, there will never arise any new original idea, such as that of a necessary connexion [...]' (88). Nor does this unwinding of knowledge end with causation. Ultimately, belief itself is shown to rest upon nothing more substantial than sentiment: the 'force and vivacity' communicated by an impression to an idea, which 'super-adds nothing to the idea, but only changes our manner of conceiving it [...]' (101). Nonetheless, as Hume concedes later in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, one cannot live one's life as a sceptic: 'Nature will always maintain her rights, and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning whatsoever' (41).

It is because of this caveat that Hume's arguments in the *Treatise* have carried an air of paradox for many readers. As Kenneth Richman notes, 'Hume appears to do the following: (a) endorse beliefs in objects and causes, (b) hold that we should not endorse beliefs that do not

have appropriate grounding in our impressions [...] and (c) hold that the beliefs in objects and causes do not have appropriate grounding of our impressions' (Richman 3). One result of this paradox is a split between what Richman calls 'Old' Humeans and 'New' Humeans.

Commentators of the former persuasion, such as Stephen and Halévy, tend to downplay position (a) and emphasise (b) and (c). Accordingly, such 'sceptical' readings of Hume tend to see his impressionism as exhaustively phenomenalist. According to this view, Hume's sceptical attack on representationalism and the 'correspondence' model of truth signals the bankruptcy of an abstracted, atomistic view of experience and meaning. Since the work of Norman Kemp Smith, however, there has been a tendency to downplay positions (b) and (c) and foreground (a).

Following this line of interpretation, 'New' Humeans such as Annette Baier, Peter Jones and Donald Livingston see Hume's impressionism as a manoeuvre whereby Hume exploded the hypostatized vocabulary of ideas and impressions in order to create a new language of experience based upon non-epistemological principles of feeling, habit and custom. From this perspective, Hume's adoption and deconstruction of the language of 'ideas' is the first step in a process of redescription that restored the social, dialogical and experimental dimensions to 'experience.'

One virtue of such readings (though not one previously noted) is that they highlight the significance of the subtitle of the *Treatise*: 'An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects.' Hume's very specific use of the term 'experimental' here is easily overlooked. Since Locke, empirical philosophy had entertained the idea of the mind as a forum for philosophical experimentation. For Hume, however, the laboratory for empirical experiment was not the mind as Locke's *camera obscura* of abstracted consciousness, but something closer to mind *in society*. He makes this point quite explicitly in his Introduction to the *Treatise* when he cautions the reader that '[w]e must [...] glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures' (xix). In this way, Hume effected a transition from a model of thought based upon pure induction and *objectivity* (i.e. upon an epistemological binary of subject / object) to one that was based upon sentiment and *intersubjectivity*. By downgrading 'correspondence' theories of truth and meaning, which generally viewed experience as a form of representation, he abandoned the Lockean image of punctual subjectivity: that is, one constituted by a manifold of atomised experiences (ideas and impressions), and underwritten by a providential rationality. In its place, Hume developed a model of 'experience' based in trial and experiment within a constitutive framework of social custom, sentiment, and most importantly, trust.ⁱ Trust became vital to Hume's thought precisely because his sceptical approach left the human intellect with no other means of support than the

sentiment of belief, the *manner* in which the object is conceived. As Miriam Solomon argues, the lesson Hume derives from scepticism is that ‘knowledge requires more than reason and experience, not that knowledge is impossible’ (52). For Hume, radical scepticism led to social empiricism.

The familiar essay as philosophical performance

Thanks to Hume then, literary form became a philosophical issue. Interest in the regulation of trust by means of literary performances that consolidated social and epistemological norms engendered, in turn, a concern with the performative dimension of language as well as with the status and function of philosophical writing. In particular, the essay, with its amenability to tentative, unmethodical improvisation and friendly conversation, appeared to fit an image of reason based on the very ideas of custom, habit and sentiment presented in Hume’s picture of a decentred, constitutive intersubjectivity. Tellingly, as Hume abandoned representational empiricism in favour of ‘easy’ empiricism, he drew away from the systematic treatise and moved towards the familiar essay as *the* genre of philosophy.

To an extent, Hume was walking a well-trodden path. Since the days of *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*, the periodical essay had functioned as both medium and model for the open, egalitarian and polite discursiveness of the public sphere. Addison and Steele had exploited the essay’s potential to move amphibiously across boundaries, between philosophical and literary modes of expression, as well as between academic and informal writing. Most notably, in *The Spectator* no. 10, Addison declared his intention to emulate Socrates, who ‘brought Philosophy down from Heaven, to inhabit among Men,’ by bringing ‘Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-tables, and in Coffee-houses’ (44). In this way, essaying as an activity eschewed the quest for certainty in order to foster an idea of ‘experience’ very close to that outlined in the Introduction to Hume’s *Treatise*: an experimental activity in which the mind came to reshape itself through its engagement with human life in ‘the common course of the world.’

And yet, there is a vital difference between the essayism of Hume and that of Addison. For Addison, the Lockean subject remained intellectually punctual and intact. Consequently, despite his claim that the experimentalism of the familiar essay provided philosophy with a pathway from the cloisters of learning into the bright thoroughfare of the public sphere, Addison did not consider the possibility that the very customs, habits and conventions depicted in the

pages of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* might themselves be epistemologically constitutive. The correspondence between ‘trust’ and ‘truth’ ran in one direction only: the former could, at most, only ever count as limited evidence for the latter. For Hume, however truth *itself* could not be separated from ‘common life and Conversation.’ Consequently, what one finds in the essays of Hume is a more radical socialisation of empiricism in the face of an intolerable but incorrigible epistemological scepticism. By replacing Locke’s providential, private and pictorial conception of human reason with a conventional, public and grammatical one, Hume implied that the truth of any empirical statement ultimately depended upon the *manner* of its performance and upon the ‘sentiment’ attached to its conception. In foregrounding the performative function of philosophical language, Hume dramatically raised the stakes for the essayist as stylist. Put simply, manner became everything.

It is this consciousness of the fundamentally *performative* nature of the philosophical writer’s task that distinguishes mid-century essayists such as Hume and Johnson from their Augustan predecessors. After Hume, the problem of empiricism’s relation to public discourse was no longer simply one of how philosophical thoughts might be curated and transmitted to the reading public, it was also one of how an empirical concept of ‘experience’ might itself be shaped by the conventions and practices of communication. In effect, Hume’s insistence that conversation forms a constitutive part of experience radicalised Addison’s project to socialise philosophy by placing intersubjectivity at the very core of human thought: while Addison and Steele brought philosophy to the ‘coffee-house’, Hume endeavoured to bring the ‘coffee-house’ to philosophy.

Accordingly, Hume’s own essays attempted to police polite culture through performances of moderate scepticism. He developed an ‘easy,’ conversable empiricism that endeavoured to reinforce solidarity rather than demonstrate logical certainty. And yet, the very need to ‘reinforce’ trust indicated that trust had its limits. Hume’s technique as a writer incorporated the thought that these limits are not defined rationally, but through human second nature: through emotion, custom and habit. In this respect, Hume is the disciple of Cicero rather than Newton, deploying measured prose that asserts epistemic authority through its rhetoric of reasonableness and moderation, through its commanding *exhibition* of communicability. Nowhere is this more evident than in the exemplary act of polite self-fashioning exhibited by his suitably brief autobiographical essay, ‘My Own Life,’ in which the reader encounters the persona of the philosophically indifferent man of letters:

To conclude historically with my own character. I am, or rather was (for that is the style I must now use in speaking of myself, which emboldens me the more to speak my sentiments); I was, I say, a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions. (*Essays* xl)

Here, the cardinal virtues of Hume's Academic scepticism, of 'mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humour', are revealed to be those of the author himself. Above all, the 'moderation' of the philosopher's passions, which is itself reflected in the modesty of the self-representation Hume offers, typifies the philosophical attribute of *ataraxia* (detachment) required to live a civilized and enlightened life without epistemic grounds or foundations. This philosophical moderation lay at the heart of Hume's essayism, insofar as the essay genre provided him with a literary analogue for the conversable world and an antidote to the philosophical enthusiasm of systematic, rationalist philosophy. In this way, Hume used the familiar discourse of the essay to reposition epistemology, moving it away from what he saw as the ineffectual domains of truth and reason and into the active territory of public discourse, custom and opinion. By doing so, he relocated the philosophical authority of the man of letters from the foundations of truth to the circulation of trust.

This meant that the essayist took on the role of a diplomat between the worlds of learning and polite conversation, or as Hume puts it in his unpublished essay 'Of Essay-Writing', as 'a Kind of Resident or Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation [...]':

Learning has been as great a Loser by being shut up in Colleges and Cells, and secluded from the World and good Company. By that Means, every Thing of what we call *Belles Lettres* became totally barbarous, being cultivated by Men without any Taste of Life or Manners, and without that Liberty and Facility of Thought and Expression, which can only be acquir'd by Conversation. Even Philosophy went to Wrack by this moaping recluse Method of Study, and became as chimerical in her Conclusions as she was unintelligible in her Stile and Manner of Delivery. And indeed, what cou'd be expected from Men who never consulted Experience in any of their Reasonings, or who never

search'd for that Experience, where alone it is to be found, in common Life and Conversation? (*Essays* 535).

Once again, as Hume makes clear in this passage, experience cannot be separated from 'common life and Conversation.' The essayist, unlike the solitary scholar, adapts the 'the higher and more difficult Operations of the Mind' to 'the easier and more gentle Exercises of the Understanding' (*Essays* 533) not because (or not solely because) this helps him to communicate truth, but because it is *only* in such communication that truth ultimately lies.

Sociability through re-enchantment: The Romantic familiar essay.

What does the familiar essay's shifting epistemological significance in the eighteenth century tell us about the development of the genre in the early nineteenth century? Essayists such as Lamb and Hazlitt inherited from Hume and Johnson a readiness to draw upon the performative resources of the familiar essay in order to imagine a shared community of opinion and belief. What distinguishes Romantic essayists from their predecessors, however, is the issue of what was at *stake* in the performance of essaying. For the latter, the language game engaged by the familiar essay necessitated that certain normative structures were *presupposed*. For Hume in particular, such structures were determined by custom and reinforced by the exhibition of courteous manners. In such cases, it was assumed that the reader could not fully appreciate the performance of the author without already sharing a great deal of their 'common' background of beliefs. In other words, what was epistemologically at stake for the Neoclassical familiar essayist was the status of a truth whose verifiability is fundamentally a practical and intersubjective affair.

For the essayist of the early nineteenth century, however, the fiction of familiarity was beginning to wear thin. Indeed, perceptions of what was at stake in the literary performance of the essay had already begun to shift significantly by the end of the eighteenth century. Most notably, the political upheavals of the 1790s made the consolidation of imagined solidarity envisaged by Hume appear more nakedly politicised, recast by Burke as a call for national unity around feelings of familial partiality and prejudice. Moreover, the essayist now wrote for a marketplace that had expanded and diversified: as Jon Klancher and William St. Clair have documented, patronage and subscription had given way to contracts with booksellers, the periodical essay had been replaced by the magazine and the newspaper, and an increasingly productive printing press was undergoing its industrial revolution. This environment presented

the essayist with new challenges: it was difficult to consolidate ways of understanding the world when the common ground of good sense and precedent presupposed by Hume and Johnson had fragmented, polarised, or been discredited. Hume's Ciceronian idea of literature as the domain of polite letters, courtly virtues and easy philosophising was overtaken by the Romantic notion of literature as, in Wordsworth's phrase, 'the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge [...]' (141). As social harmonies were exchanged for transcendental sublimities, the Romantic enactment of familiar conversation sought to establish a different relationship with readers, one based in the idealised grounds of singularity and enchantment.

Consequently, the Romantic essayist's primary task became one of establishing social and epistemological norms through the exercise of imaginative power. As writers sought new grounds for literary 'truth', the experimental maintenance and consolidation of intersubjective consensus was replaced by the experimental *production* and exploration of new intellectual territory. This shift is reflected in the changing persona of the essayist. While the individual figured in the prose identity of Hume presupposed an intersubjective conception of the speaking subject—one whose unity is held together by pragmatic, rather than by metaphysical, principles—in philosophical Romanticism, the unification of style and substance was underpinned by an *ideal* presence. Rather than seeking to reinforce consensuality, the subject invoked by the romantic familiar essay was one who searches, however unsuccessfully, for transcendental authentication. The persona of Lamb's essayist, for instance, is constructed around the ironic and partial recuperation of a lost wholeness, often figured as a borderline, twilight territory of enchanted consciousness. 'Imperfect Sympathies,' with its digs at the moral philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment, exemplifies this condition while explicitly opposing it to a 'Scottish' tradition of intellectualised intersubjectivity:

I can look with no indifferent eye upon things or persons. [...]. I am, in plainer words, a bundle of prejudices— [...]. There is an order of imperfect intellects (under which mine must be content to rank) which in its constitution is essentially anti-Caledonian. The owners of the sort of faculties I allude to, have minds rather suggestive than comprehensive. They have no pretences to much clearness or precision in their ideas, or in their manner of expressing them. Their intellectual wardrobe (to confess freely) has few whole pieces in it. They are content with fragments and scattered pieces of Truth. [...]. The light that lights them is not steady and polar, but mutable and shifting: waxing,

and again waning. [...] They are no systematizers, and would but err more by attempting it. (58-59)

Whether or not Lamb had Hume in mind as his model of the ‘Caledonian’ intellect, the ‘systematizer’ label is one that the latter would have rejected, belying as it does his concern with folding the *episteme* of scientific knowledge into the *doxa* of social communication. Indeed, for Hume, as long as the credit supply of trust underpinning intersubjective consensus could be maintained, the metaphysical status of human belief need not be a pressing concern, still less one that called for systematization. The task of the essayist as an epistemological diplomat was to keep conversation going, and above all to keep such conversation polite and civilized. In ‘Imperfect Sympathies,’ however, epistemological doubt itself becomes aestheticized into an ideal presence that can only be approached through imagination. Instead of seeking to consolidate assumed intersubjective consensus *a la* the ‘Caledonian’ constitution, Lamb’s ‘Elia’ essays endeavour to *produce* affective connections through a kind of exemplary performance of individuality. Elia offers to engage his reader in a language game based upon the celebration of whim, prejudice and singularity. The state of mind required for this game is precisely what the ‘brain of a true Caledonian’ lacks, i.e. ‘misgivings, half-intuitions, semi-consciousnesses, partial illuminations, dim instincts, embryo conceptions.’ In this way, the aporia that caused Hume to abandon epistemology altogether is reified in Lamb as a borderline territory of re-enchantment: what Elia refers to as ‘[t]he twilight of dubiety’ (60). Whereas in Hume the protean nature of the familiar essay is utilized in the service of dialogue, in Lamb the essay’s shapelessness is *itself* aestheticized, offering to charm the reader rather than draw them into an imaginary conversation. Rather than being dedicated to the maintenance of everyday experience in the common course of the world, the essay’s liminality is redirected towards the recovery and transcendence of the ordinary through the thoroughly extraordinary performance of the essayist.

The differences between the two essayists should not be overstated. Like Hume, Lamb uses the conversational character of the familiar essay in order to conduct experiments in trust with his readers. What the persona of Elia offers in return for such trust, however, is not so much reassuring sociability as the possibility of the reader’s re-enchantment with the world. Indeed, in his essay ‘The Old Margate Hoy’ (1823), Elia introduces a figure who uncannily resembles the essayist himself. Recounting a sea trip upon the eponymous vessel during a miserable holiday to the south coast of England, Lamb describes one of his fellow passengers as ‘the greatest liar I had met with then, or since,’ one who ‘plunged at once into the depths of your

credulity.’ This ‘Spanish complexioned young man’ tells tall tales of how he had served as Aide-de-camp to a Persian prince, seen a phoenix in Egypt and sailed through the legs of the Colossus at Rhode. And yet, rather than inciting irritated incredulity, these stories offer a welcome respite from the tedium of the boat trip. More specifically, Elia recounts, ‘[h]is dreaming fancies had transported us beyond the “ignorant present.”’ Like the reader, the passengers on the boat are placed temporarily ‘in a new world, with everything unfamiliar about us, and the time and place disposed us to the reception of any prodigious marvel whatsoever’ (178-79). In a similar way, Lamb’s method as an essayist is to play a delicate game with the trust of his reader. Like the liar which his very name evokes, ‘Elia’ dives straight into his reader’s confidence. By doing so, however, he does not forfeit trust: in the essay, as on the deck of the boat, there is an implicit recognition that the normal rules of social intercourse are suspended.

One might take this further, and suggest that the familiar essay as a genre internalises and experiments with the thought that such a ‘leap of faith,’ or act of trust is fundamental to all human communication, and not just in the conspicuously groundless conditions of a boat expedition, where the subject is all at sea. Hume’s essays in ‘easy’ empiricism and Lamb’s ‘Old Margate Hoy’ reject the idea that language is a medium for expressing what we have already thought. In reality, they suggest, we never get to construct our thoughts in a kind of empirical dry dock; instead, like the essayist, we must first dive into conversation and build our vessel out of port. For Hume, the essayist’s task is to steady this vessel, to keep it afloat through the polite performance of certain virtues and manners. Lamb’s Elia, on the other hand, is more concerned with cultivating a sense of wonder in the spontaneity of the dialogue that floated thought in the first place, at the very possibility of a shared experience, amid surmises and semi-consciousness, that might count as ‘truth’. Despite their many differences, however, what the writings of Hume and Lamb share is an awareness of the way in which the performance of the familiar essayist’s experiments can promote or imperil the communication upon which social knowledge depends.

Conclusion

It follows from the foregoing that the title of Lamb’s self-consciously unsympathetic essay should be treated with caution. Lamb’s essayism does not signal a radical departure from the language of trust and intersubjectivity developed by Hume and the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, an edging out of social empiricism by Romantic idealism. Instead, what both Hume and Lamb’s prose writings exhibit is a profound ambivalence towards systematic

philosophy itself. It is this ambivalence that lends the familiar essay in this period its shape and its fundamental purpose, creating a space in which formal understanding, aesthetic appreciation and social communication overlapped. Seen from this perspective, the conversational, ironic and philosophy-deflating Hume and the conversational, ironic and philosophy-ridiculing Lamb had a surprising amount in common, not least in the ways that both defied contemporary philosophical taxonomies.

Nonetheless, in its idealisation of incompleteness, Lamb's sympathetically unsympathetic broadside against philosophy approximates a concept of aesthetic irony in ways that Hume's does not. At the heart of this irony, as formulated two decades earlier in the Romanticism of the Jena circle, is transcendental philosophy's concern with thought's presupposition of the incomprehensible. This concern is expressed most distinctly by Friedrich Schlegel's warning, in his essay 'On Incomprehensibility,' against rationalism:

Yes, even man's most precious possession, his own inner happiness, depends in the last analysis, as anybody can easily verify, on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment you subjected it to rational analysis. Verily, it would fare badly for you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become fully comprehensible in earnest. (Simpson 185)

In a similar way, the twilight half-knowledge contained in the signature gesture of Lamb's familiar essay is ultimately underwritten by the aestheticisation of the incomprehensible, by what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have described as the 'Literary Absolute', a transcendently postulated but unattainable unification of subject and object, form and content. In theoretical terms, this entailed the idea that literature *qua* 'Literature' might, as pure 'generativity,' compensate for, or even redeem philosophy's failure to complete itself by figuring the absolute *productively*. In this way, as they put it, '[R]omantic thought involves not only the absolute of literature, but literature as the absolute. Romanticism is the inauguration of the *literary absolute*' (12). Such a position, however, as Schlegel himself acknowledged, involved setting out from (while by no means remaining in) a fundamentally Kantian understanding of the dependence of phenomenal experience upon strictly noumenal modes of thought.

The catch here, of course, is that in Lamb's writing (as in that of most of his British Romantic contemporaries), the labours and rewards of visionary imagination are invoked in the absence of transcendental apparatuses and thus a fully theorised account of the work of art itself as autotelic. Consequently, while *transcendence* of empirical, quotidian reality (Elia's 'ignorant present') remains tacitly embedded in his writing as a proleptic ideal, the *transcendental* conditions of this goal remain untheorized. In this way, Lamb's essays said to be both culturally and philosophically liminal: not only do they occupy an indeterminate status between 'high' and 'low' literature, they also offer an image of the self that brings together an inherited discourse of sociability and pragmatic intersubjectivity with a transcendently idealist conception of aesthetic capability that itself remains incomplete. Thus, while for Hume and his Neoclassical literary milieu the problem of writing the familiar essay was one of how to ground authority and consolidate knowledge in the 'conversable' world in the absence of apodictic certainties, the challenge facing Lamb and his contemporaries was that of how to privilege the discursive space of the essay as ideal and aesthetic *without* collapsing its numinous aura of enchantment into the bathos of everyday exchange.

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Notes

ⁱ Significantly, until the eighteenth century, the words ‘experience’ and ‘experiment’ are so closely associated that they are used more or less synonymously to mean the act of practical, tentative trial. Johnson’s *Dictionary* testifies to this continued intimacy, defining the noun ‘experience’ as ‘1. Practice; frequent trial’ and ‘2. Knowledge gained by trial and practice.’ The latter notion of experience as *practice* rather than as *phenomena* was still current at the time and is in turn associated with a heightened awareness of the epistemic role of fictions in discourse. Once epistemological relations are redescribed in terms of social relationships, the most pressing questions that arise relate to the status of the norms and bonds that regulate the community of knowledge. This ultimately produces a concern with what might be considered as the social *a priori* of knowledge: rational accommodation, trust and testimony.